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ABSTRACT

Researchers have pointed to cultural diversity as a major source of conflict in our nation's schools, noting that these conflicts have the potential to escalate into violence. This study seeks to identify the types of intercultural encounters that young people themselves find troublesome. Participants were 906 sixth graders in 12 elementary schools in a large, ethnically diverse school district. Each student was asked to write an answer to the following: Describe the best thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background; Describe the worst thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background. Responses were content analyzed. The results were 8 categories for "best" responses and 11 categories for "worst" responses. This paper identifies and describes the 11 categories for "worst" responses, thus providing a view of what sixth graders find to be the most troublesome intercultural encounters. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/RS)

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SIXTH GRADERS SPEAK OUT

Sixth Graders Speak Out:

Troublesome Intercultural Encounters

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Abstract

Researchers have pointed to cultural diversity as a major source of conflict in our nation's schools, noting that these conflicts have the potential to escalate into violence. This study seeks to identify the types of intercultural encounters that young people themselves find troublesome. Participants were 906 sixth graders in 12 elementary schools in an large, ethnically diverse school district. Each student was asked to write an answer to the following: Describe the **best** thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background; Describe the **worst** thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background. Responses were content analyzed. The results were 8 categories for "best" responses and 11 categories for "worst" responses. This paper identifies and describes the 11 categories for "worst" responses, thus providing a view of what sixth graders find to be the most troublesome intercultural encounters.

Sixth Graders Speak Out:

Troublesome Intercultural Encounters

Conflict among students is an increasing problem in the schools of our nation. Regulus and Leonaitis (1995) suggest that increasing cultural diversity is a major source of conflict, and "misunderstandings about the different communication and interaction styles as well as values and beliefs systems among racial, ethnic, and social groups can cause conflict that escalates into violence" (p. 41). This study seeks to identify intercultural encounters students themselves identify as troublesome. With this information, educators can design intervention strategies to help reduce the occurrence of these encounters or to prevent them from escalating.

The School Setting

A pivotal point in youth development comes as youth move from elementary school to secondary school. In discussing Black and White relationships, DuBois and Hirsch (1990) report that there is "evidence that racial cleavage in friendship patterns increases between the elementary school and secondary school years...Both increased separation of black and white peer groups, as well as conflict between the two groups, may help to make interracial friendships increasingly rare during adolescence" (p. 524). Other researchers point to adolescence as a pivotal point in development because it is the time in which minority adolescents come to a sense of self as group members, achieving an ethnic identity (Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997).

Sixth-grade classrooms in California's Central San Joaquin Valley provide an excellent place for research on intergroup relations of multiple ethnic groups. These students are still in self-contained classrooms which facilitates contact between students. Studying them provides a look at students prior to the changes that take place in junior high school. Furthermore, reports

indicate that the diversity of California's Central Valley reflects the future diversity of the nation. Projections from the U.S. Census data suggest that minorities will actually be the majority (57%) of children in California schools by 2010 (Braddock, Dawkins, & Wilson, 1995). That diversity already has come to this Valley. It has a mixture of rural and urban population including commuters to the San Francisco Bay Area, Whites, African Americans, Hispanic residents and migrant workers, and a large number of Southeast Asian refugees, including Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong.

Review of the Literature

Peer Group Interaction

Much of the research on intergroup contact has dealt with the contact hypothesis, proposed by Allport (1954) and others, which suggests that contact with members of different cultural groups improves intergroup relations and reduces prejudice. In nearly 40 years of research on this hypothesis, several factors have emerged as "core conditions for contact to improve intergroup relations: equal status..., cooperative interdependence within the group..., support by authority figures, and opportunities to interact with outgroup members as individuals" (Stephan & Brigham, 1985, p. 2). The research on the hypothesis has primarily focused on African Americans and Whites and has yielded some inconsistent results. However, findings suggest that interracial neighborhood contacts decreased Whites' perceptions of hostility, but interracial friendships decreased African Americans' perceptions of racial hostility (Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Ellison and Powers (1994) indicate that even though casual interracial contact, such as neighborhood contact, bears little relationship to African American racial attitudes, casual contact is still valuable in that it facilitates the development of interracial friendships which do

change attitudes for African Americans.

In a study of African American, Latino, and Asian eighth and eleventh grade students, Phinney et al. (1997) found that contact outside of school related to more positive attitudes to members of other ethnic groups. Furthermore, diversity in the student's prior school led to more social interactions with other group members in the current school, emphasizing the importance of intergroup contact over longer periods of time. Phinney et al. conclude that "contact at a younger age, in elementary school when children are developing and solidifying their sense of group differences (Aboud, 1988) may be particularly valuable in promoting positive intergroup attitudes" (p. 966).

In a study of norms of interethnic contact and friendship among 6th grade students, Jaasma and Hilpert (1998) found students favor playing with students from other ethnic backgrounds and choosing them as friends. Self-contained multi-cultural classrooms appear to meet the criteria identified in which the contact hypothesis improves intergroup relations. In these classes, students have fairly equal status, teachers and administrators support intergroup contact and structure opportunities for cooperative interdependence among the students, and students have opportunities to interact with members of other ethnic backgrounds as individuals.

This study seeks to identify experiences which hinder the positive effects of contact, experiences students themselves report as troublesome in intercultural encounters.

Method

Participants were 906 sixth-graders (ages 11 and 12) in 12 elementary schools in a large, ethnically diverse school district. These 906 students represented the following ethnic backgrounds: 5.3% African American; 2.9% American Indian; 15.4% Asian; .7% Filipino; 40.6%

Hispanic; 1.2% Pacific Islander; 18.0% White, and 13.5% Other (2.4% provided no data on ethnicity).

Participants completed questionnaires which were administered by three graduate students trained in questionnaire administration. Questionnaires were completed by the students in their classrooms, usually with the teacher present. However, all 6th graders at two schools completed the questionnaires together in the cafeteria. The questionnaire asked each student to write a response to the following statements: Describe the **best** thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background; Describe the **worst** thing that's ever happened to you with a person of another ethnic background. On the introductory page of the questionnaire was the following statement:

ETHNIC BACKGROUND MEANS:

American Indian or Alaskan Native
Asian
Black not of Hispanic Origin
Filipino
Hispanic
Pacific Islander
White not of Hispanic Origin

These were the categories used by the school district to designate ethnic background. The graduate student administering the questionnaire described the term "ethnic background" by reading this list of descriptors with the students prior to them completing the questionnaire.

Since 906 students each described a "best" and "worst" experience, 1812 responses were generated. To facilitate a content analysis of the responses, the "best" and "worst" responses for each participant were separated. A graduate student in Communication Studies sorted all the "best" responses into categories which reflected the same type of occurrence, and all the "worst"

responses into such categories. The results were a total of 36 categories, 20 categories for "best" and 16 categories for "worst."

The 36 categories were reviewed, identifying boundaries of each category. These category descriptions were provided to a second graduate student who sorted the 1812 responses into the 20 "best" and 16 "worst" categories. Inter-coder reliability was determined for these two sorts. The inter-coder reliability score for "best" was 82% and for "worst" was 86%.

To assist in analysis of this large number of responses, the QSR NUD-IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) software (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd., 1997) was used. All responses were typed in a word processor, imported into QSR NUD-IST, and coded into the 36 categories as was determined by the sort. Reports were made of each category which listed all responses coded into that category. (A report in QSR NUD-IST is a plain text document which displays all data requested.)

The reports of the responses in each category were examined to determine the range of responses in each category and to achieve an understanding of the category. The 36 categories were placed on index cards. Through a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the cards (and the categories they represented) were compared and contrasted. The categories were thus refined. Responses that were eliminated at this point were those that provided no information relevant to "best" and "worst" occurrences: blank responses; responses which said "I don't know"; and responses which were clearly not applicable to an intercultural encounter, such as "I fell off my bike and broke my arm." As a result, 719 "best" responses and 795 "worst" responses remained. The final refined categories included 8 "best" categories and 11 "worst" categories. The remaining responses were all checked against the 19 new categories. This process concluded

when it was determined that all remaining responses fit into one of the new categories.

Each response was recoded in QSR NUD-IST to reflect the new category in which it was placed. Reports were made of all the responses in each category. This paper identifies and describes the 11 "worst" categories.

Results

Eleven categories emerged for the "worst" experiences students reported having with a person of another ethnic background. Below each category will be defined and examples of student responses will be provided. (Students' spelling and grammar appear as in the original.) The first two categories, Because I'm Different and Can't Understand, occur specifically because of interethnic differences. They stem from prejudice and language barriers.

Because I'm Different

Students reported their "worst" interaction with someone of another ethnic background occurring because they were different from the other. The Because I'm Different category appeared in 4.4 % of the "worst" responses. Students cited factors contributing to difference such as race, color, and looks, as these examples indicate:

> Thay didn't like me becose I was a different color then them so thay called me white crash. (White female)

> The worst thing that ever happend to me with a person of another ethnic background is that she was insulting me and talking bad about my family because we were different. (Hispanic female)

> The worst thing was when a person didn't like what race or how we looked. (Asian female)

Being different also was connected to prejudice--both having others be prejudiced against oneself and evidencing prejudice through one's response:

> That they were prejudiced to me. (Hispanic female)
>
> I was forced to sit by one. (Other, male)

The idea of prejudice is complex, however. Several students remarked that they were accused of prejudice: "Some told me I was prejudice because I didn't agree with them" (Hispanic female). Not agreeing was perceived as prejudice even though the respondents did not intend it that way.

The results of the "worst" experiences occurring Because I'm Different are forms of isolation, as these students explain:

> One day I went to my ant Martha and I went to p.a.l. to play some pool, and cool games and they didn't let me play because I was Hispanic, and I felt really Really sad. (Hispanic male)
>
> The worst thing that ever happend to me was they told me to go away because I was different. (Hispanic female)

These responses indicate that youth were refusing to play with those who are different, but this isolation was also attributed to adults: "I went over her house to eat dinner and her parents didn't like me because I think I was black. No matter what anyone say we all got the same blood which is red" (Black female).

Overall, the Because I'm Different responses indicated young people were being isolated because of prejudice stemming from ethnic differences.

Can't Understand

In dealing with "worst" intercultural encounters, students reported that language was a

barrier. Can't Understand was a category which contained 1.2% of the responses. Students directly linked not understanding with language: "They talk in Spanish and I can't understand" (White female). For some, the language barrier resulted in negative perceptions of the other culture: "Chinness people say things we can't understand and may say something bad about you" (Hispanic female). For others, the language barrier resulted in problems that might not have occurred if they could have understood each other: "He didn't understand my language and he got me in trouble" (Other male). Another result of misunderstandings was the loss of opportunity to develop friendships: "I couldn't spin the night at my friends house because I couldn't understand her parents" (Other female).

Overall, student responses in the Can't Understand category showed that language misunderstandings lead to a variety of consequences that exclude or present problems which must then be handled.

The next three categories all concern aggression: Fighting, Verbal Aggression, and Indirect Aggression. Although aggression would seem to be problematic for young people in any circumstance, here it is linked to intercultural difficulties.

Fighting

The fighting category was the most predominant one among the responses (43.5%), but most of the students did not describe the nature of the fighting but said things such as, "The worst thing that happened to me is getting in fights" (Asian male). However, 24% of the Fighting responses did specify an act of physical aggression, such as getting beat up, being jumped, being hit:

> One day I was playing with my friend. A Japanese came and she tried to beat me

up for no excuse. This girl was 5 years older than me and I was scared to death. (Hispanic female)

The worst thing was some people jump or attack me. (Asian male)

A white boy from another school blind sided me with a sucker punch. (Other male)

I got in a fight and cut her head open with a brick. (White female)

For Fighting, students often gave either a cause for the fight or a result. The most frequently sighted causes were ethnic differences or slurs, problems while playing, dislike for each other, and disagreements in what was said:

We got into a fight because they hated Asian people. (Asian female)

The worst thing was when me and my friend got in a fight because he threw the ball at me and I got mad and I pushed him and we got into a fight. (Hispanic male)

We didn't like each other very well. We used to get into fights all the time. (Other female)

Get into a fight just because I said that their mom was strict. (Black female)

In additions, students often provided the results of fighting. The most frequently cited result of fighting was the loss of friendship, either permanently or for awhile. Some students did point to making up:

We got in a fight and weren't friends anymore cause we're both to stubborn to say sorry. (Other female)

We got into a fight and became enemies. (American Indian male)

When we fought each other. And stopped playing with each other for a month.

(Other male)

My Asian friend and I got in a fight over a stupid thing, but then we talked it over and made up. (White female)

One day I was playing with a person of another ethnic background. I won her friend and she got mad. Then we started to fight, and we both had to stay on the wall. When we were on the wall we began to talk and then we became friends. (Hispanic female)

Students also reported that they didn't like fighting and received punishments for it:

I fought with her. I didn't like it when we fought. (Hispanic female)

When I got suspended for fighting. (Other male)

Overall, the Fighting category was the most predominant response of students. Although most described fighting in general terms, about one-fourth of them described specific acts of physical aggression. Fighting made an impression on students such that they often gave causes and results of fighting.

Verbal Aggression

The Verbal Aggression category represented 20.5% of the "worst" responses. Verbal aggression is characterized by an argument or by a verbal attack. The following are examples of responses describing disagreements or arguments:

We get into arguments and sometimes we don't ever talk to each other for 10 minutes. (Hispanic female)

It was when I was playing tether ball and a girl started saying that she was there and then she pushed me and started saying stuff about my family. (American Indian

female)

Verbal Aggression was most frequently described in terms of racial slurs or name calling:

> Some people from another ethnic called me a wetback. (Hispanic male)
>
> Some girls at school who were Mexican always teased me because I was white. They would call me "white trash," and a "white bitch." I finally got really sick of it, and told my parents. (White female)

Verbal Aggression was also characterized by someone making fun of the respondent:

> When the different person keeps mocking me when I talk my language. (Asian female)
>
> When someone was making fun of my skin color. (Hispanic male)

Students rarely gave the causes for Verbal Aggression except a few prefaced their comment by saying it happened during play or because the respondent did not like the other person:

> It was when I didn't know how to play basketball and they made fun of me. (Asian female)
>
> One day I went to a party at the park and I saw a girl I didn't like because she was mean and I told her she was ugly, well she was, and I had hurt her feeling and she never talked to me neither did I talk to her. (Hispanic female)

The results of Verbal Aggression were strong emotions, such as anger or hurt: "I called somebody a chink or a nigger and they didn't appreciate it and got mad" (Hispanic female). The most prevalent response as to the results of Verbal Aggression was that the two people never spoke again or the friendship was ended:

> The worst thing that happened is that we got in a fight through the phone and

never talked to each other again. (Hispanic female)

We got in a fight. Then we were no longer best friends. We argued about our brothers graduation if they had hats or not. I said that they didn't have hats. Then we never spoke to each other. She is still mean to me. (Filipino female)

Whereas many students remarked that friendships had ended because of Verbal Aggression, several students did mention working it out and becoming friends again: "When I get into an argument with them, but we always get back together" (Asian female).

Verbal Aggression was the category with the second highest number of responses. Verbal Aggression was characterized by arguments and disagreements, often belittling the other person or his/her ethnicity. These behaviors resulted in strong emotions and often the ending of the relationship.

Indirect Aggression

For the Indirect Aggression category, the responses totaled 6.4%. In this study indirect aggression involved damaging a person through peer relations and through verbal comments to others, such as spreading rumors. In responses categorized as Indirect Aggression, a person said something about the respondent to other people rather than directly to the respondent. The following are two examples of this:

The worst thing that ever happened to me was this girl named Rachael and she talks too much bad things about me and does bad stuff and blames it on me. (Hispanic female)

She was playing with my sister and then my sister came home and she told me that my friend was talking about me behind my back. She was saying that I was having a bad

attitude and that she said that I was yelling at her saying that I hated her and that I never wanted to talk to her. (White female)

In Indirect Aggression, the contents of what is said to others may be secrets which the respondent has entrusted to the other person. Telling the secret then serves to hurt and embarrass:

The worst thing is that my friends say I like someone in front of everybody and I don't like them. (Hispanic female)

The worst thing that ever happened to me was when I told a secret and she told the whole class. (Hispanic female)

What is said to others is often described as a lie or rumor:

They spread rumors about my race. (Asian female)

When someone lied to my friend about me. (Hispanic female)

Indirect Aggression results in strong feeling, like Verbal Aggression, such as anger and embarrassment: "My friend was telling rumors about me and my friend and I hated him so bad and so did my friend" (White male). The pain caused by Indirect Aggression appears to be in the breaking of friendships, both through ostracizing a person from one's group and by breaking the friendship or relationship itself:

My best friend told a lie about me at school and became friends with another group of girls that were the same ethnic background like she is. (Asian female)

We started off the day well but now this person never acts like a friend. She even makes fun of me to her other friends. (White female)

She talked about me behind my back and never spoke to each other then. (Asian female)

In summary, the Indirect Aggression category described harming peer group relationships by going behind a person's back and saying negative things or spreading rumors about the person. Like the other forms of aggression, these behaviors resulted in strong feelings of anger and embarrassment.

The next four categories, similar to the aggression categories, are ones which would be troublesome in any situation, but here the students recollect them because a person of another ethnic background was present: Getting Mad, Stealing, Embarrassing Events, and Getting in Trouble.

Getting Mad

Getting Mad appeared in 2.5% of the responses. The student responding could either be the one who got mad or the target of another's anger:

> I got mad at the person. (Other male)
>
> They went to the store and he got mad at me. (Hispanic male)

Getting Mad seemed to be difficult when the student who was the target of anger was helpless: "They made me mad and I couldent do nothing about it" (Hispanic male). It also made the student feel badly when it was unintended: "We were just playing around but I hurt his finger and he got mad at me" (White male).

Students reported the outcomes of getting mad which included separation, exclusion, or fighting:

> The worst thing that ever happened to me and another ethnic background was when we got mad at each other and never spoke again. (Other female)
>
> Sometimes we get angry at each other. Like sometimes they don't let me play with

them. (Hispanic female)

I got really mad because he was talking about my background. We got in a big fight and was friends again. (Asian male)

One student wrote about the long-term results of unresolved anger: "We got mad at each other, and she moved and I never got to say sorry to her" (White female).

Overall, the students either saw themselves as getting mad or saw others as getting mad at them. The anger often ended in separation, but students did point to resolving differences or wishing they had.

Stealing

The Stealing category included 2.3% of the responses. Students reacted to others stealing from them: "The worst thing is that person stole from me" (Hispanic female). As is indicated in this response, the ethnicity of the other was not mentioned by students; the other was referred to as "the other person" or "they." Several students, however, described instances where they were with a friend of another ethnic background and together the two were threatened: "A friend of mine that wasn't my ethnic background, we went to the park and then went to an alley and almost got robbed" (Asian male). Overall, the loss of property was not attributed to a group but was viewed as a personal attack by another person.

Embarrassing Events

Embarrassing Events accounted for 1.6% of the responses. Embarrassing Events were of two types. The first type involved some sort of treatment by someone of another ethnic background that was viewed as negative: "The worst thing that happened was that a boy that was a Black pulled down my pantse" (Hispanic male). The second type of Embarrassing Events

involved things the student found embarrassing which happened in front of someone of another ethnic background:

> The worst thing that has happened to me with another ethnic background was when I fell of my bike and got a big cut and I started crying it was so embarrasing. (Hispanic female)
>
> The worst thing that ever happened to me with a person was that I trip and spiled my soda at the person. (Hispanic female)

These Embarrassing Events might be embarrassing in any situation, but here they are recalled because a person from another ethnic background is present either as the cause of the embarrassment or as an innocent bystander.

Getting in Trouble

Getting in Trouble was a category that appeared in 1.6% of the responses. Students identified this as a joint venture in which they and someone of another ethnic background engaged: "When I and a person of another ethnic backgroun got in trouble" (Asian male). Some students viewed the trouble as being brought on by the other person: "The worst thing was that this person came up to me and pretended to be my friend, but instead brought trouble" (Hispanic female).

Getting in Trouble was not seen as something done to one by someone else but rather something two people did together. The students recalled these events because their partner in trouble was from another ethnic background.

In the last two categories, students take a different approach to "worst" events. Loss describes the results of loss of a friend of another ethnic background. Nothing Bad indicates that

for some students, interethnic contact does not present problems.

Loss

Students reported Loss 6.7% of the time. The most predominant type of loss occurred when a friend moved away:

> The worst thing that ever happened to me with a person of another ethic background is my best friend moved away. (Black male)
>
> One day my best friends mom and my mom got into a big fight and her mom wouldn't let me talk to her and my mom wouldn't let her talk to me and they moved away and I have never found her or talked to her ever again. (Other female)

Other types of loss included separation for a time, even death:

> The worst thing that happened was that I didn't see him in two months. (White male)
>
> The worst thing that has ever happened to me was that one of my friends passed away. (Asian male)

Loss also included the loss of friendship or the inability to develop a friendship: "We always disagreed with each other and became enamies. We never had the chance to become friends" (White female). Finally, the loss of boyfriends and girlfriends was mentioned: "Well to tell you the truth the only time I had a worst time with a person that has a different background is over a boy" (Other female).

Overall, Loss described "worst" experiences in that they separated a person from a friend of another ethnic background.

Nothing Bad

Nothing Bad was a category that contained 9.2% of the responses. Many students simply responded that they had never had a "worst" experience with someone of another ethnic background: "I have never had something wrong with other people of another ethnic background" (Hispanic female). A few students, however, described their strategies for accomplishing this:

> I don't favoite my ethnic backround. I treat other them like my ethnic backround. I still have the same fun. (Hispanic female)
>
> I have never been in something bad with a person of another ethnic backround when I see that someone doesn't like me I stay as far as posible from him or her. Because then there might be trouble. (Other female)
>
> There must of never been a bad situation with someone of another ethnic background and if there ever was it was a small thing and I forgot about it. (While male)

These students provide some interesting strategies for intercultural contact--treat others as equals, stay away from potential problems, and if there are problems, put them in perspective and forget about them.

Conclusion

If contact in the schools is to improve intercultural relations, what are the situations that need to be addressed by adults to make this happen? Rather than relying on adult assessments, this study asked youth what they see as the problems. In this study, 906 sixth grade students provide their perspectives as to what occurrences are troublesome.

Student responses point overwhelmingly to aggression as the major problem. Fighting was named in 43.5% of the responses and Verbal Aggression in 20.5%. Students offer the causes of these types of aggression: ethnic differences, racial slurs, disagreements, being made fun of, and

personal dislikes. The students are also clear as to the results of aggression: loss of friendship and strong feelings of anger and hurt.

Closely connected to the causes for aggression are the categories Because I'm Different and Can't Understand. These categories show that students perceive prejudice resulting from ethnic differences and language barriers as deterrents to successful relationships.

Four of the categories spoke about problematic situations that were not directly tied to ethnic differences: Getting Mad, Stealing, Embarrassing Events, and Getting in Trouble. These accounted for a combined total of only 8% of the responses. They seemed to be recalled because a person of another ethnic background was present during the episode. Students rarely provided causes for these, but the results, especially for Getting Mad, were similar to the results of aggression--separation and exclusion.

It is interesting that 6.7% of the students framed their "worst" experience as losing a friend of another ethnic background (Loss). The major cause for this loss was that the friend moved away. These young people are feeling the pains that come with a mobile society. It was refreshing to see that 9.2% of the students reported Nothing Bad had happened. Since "blank" responses and "I don't know" responses had been eliminated, the results for the Nothing Bad category reflect that these students had thought about intercultural experiences and did not find them troublesome. Nothing Bad was not characteristic of the responses of any one ethnicity. These student responses represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds: African American, American Indian, Asian, Filipino, Hispanic, Other, and White.

All the responses in this study show that intercultural difficulties hurt because they cause separation and loss of friendship. The desire for meaningful relationships appears to be the strong

motivating force for these young people. Efforts to build friendships and to reduce aggression and racial slurs would greatly improve intercultural relationships. Educators might do well to heed the strategies for dealing with intercultural encounters described by several young people: treat others as equals, avoid potential trouble, and forget about the small infractions.

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